

Panel: How to commemorate slavery in R.I.?

As part of its ongoing effort to study and address historical slavery, Brown University appoints a 10-member panel to determine what to do next.

BY LINDA BORG
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — Brown University has established a 10-member commission to explore how the history of slavery and the slave trade in Rhode Island should be commemorated in the state and at the university.

The Commission to Commemorate the History of Slavery in Rhode Island is one of a sweeping series of recommendations made by the university's Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, which spent more than three years examining the university's historic ties to slavery and the slave trade and produced a 106-page report, released in October.

Among the report's recommendations was the creation of a \$10-million endowment to improve Providence public schools, creating a center for research on slavery and justice at Brown, and expanding opportunities at the university for those disadvantaged by the legacies of slavery. The steer-

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ing committee also called for the establishment of a slave trade memorial, a "living site of memory, inviting fresh discovery without provoking paralysis or shame."

The report, commissioned by President Ruth J. Simmons in 2003, found that some of the university's early benefactors benefited from their involvement in the slave trade, and that Brown benefited from their participation.

The university said a slave trade memorial was one way for the university to move forward, recognizing that the damage wrought by slavery can never be undone but that there is much that Brown can do to help those who are still suffering from slavery's consequences.

"The report is really a summons to us," Simmons said in an earlier interview. "It calls us to re-

member that in any given time, moral acts can have an enormous impact."

The commission, which will formerly be announced today, will be charged with establishing the memorial.

"Our first task is to listen to a wide range of community members to see what they would find useful," said Steven Lubar, a professor of American civilization at Brown and a member of the commission. "Some wonderful memorials have been built about slavery. We need to look at the work that has been done around the world."

Lubar teaches a class on memorials that explores how society chooses to remember the past. A memorial, he said, can encompass much more than a physical tribute to a person or event; it can be a ceremony, a publication, even a community forum.

Rabbi Leslie Y. Gutterman is one of the appointees to the commission, which includes members of the Brown community as

well as individuals nominated by Governor Carcieri and Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline of Providence. Rabbi Gutterman, who has served Temple Beth-El in Providence since 1970, said it seems appropriate for a member of the Jewish community to participate in this process because "the Jewish master story is one of escape from slavery."

"Universities, at their best, do more than educate the mind," he said yesterday. "They show us how to become better people, how to become more sensitive, more caring. It is my hope that this commission is able to do just that."

Another member, Deborah Smith, hopes that through the work of this commission, slavery will be brought out into the open, where it can be discussed freely.

"Too often, slavery is treated as a time we want to forget," said Smith, the director of municipal and external affairs for Carcieri. "But slaves made a contribution to Rhode Island and we need to

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acknowledge that. Maybe if we allowed the issue of slavery to surface, it would move us to a common hue."

Another commission member, Spencer Crew, is the director of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, and the incoming president of the Brown Alumni Association. A historian by trade, Crew spent more than 20 years at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., where he was director of the American History Museum for eight years.

Besides creating a memorial, Crew is interested in looking at what Brown can do for the city's public schools, particularly in the area of public service.

"History gets lost in our everyday lives," he said. "I think if we can find something that keeps people remembering the legacy of slavery and the importance of its impact, that's a good thing for society."

The other members of the commission are:

■ Kerry Coppin, an associate professor of art at Brown who is currently the photography curator/adviser at the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society in Providence.

■ Dietrich Neumann, a professor of architecture at Brown who was named Rhode Island Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation in 1995 and has won teaching awards at Brown in 1993, 1994 and 1999.

■ Kerry Smith, an associate professor of history at Brown and chair of East Asian studies at the university. Smith served on the Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, is a former Fulbright fellow, and an author of several articles on Japan during the interwar years.

■ Joaquina Bela Teixeira, executive director of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society who also specializes in exhibition programs and community outreach. She has curated the Annual African American Legacy: An Exposition of Art, and

worked on the Urban Roots Tour, which highlights African-American heritage in Providence.

■ O. Rogerie Thompson, an associate justice at Rhode Island Superior Court who earned her undergraduate degree from Brown and her law degree from Boston University School of Law. Thompson was the first black woman to be appointed to the Superior Court and has served on numerous committees, including the Rhode Island Children's Crusade for Higher Education.

■ Michael S. Van Leesten is the deputy executive director of public affairs at the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation in Connecticut. He has previously served as the executive director of the Providence Department of Planning and Development, chairman of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and was a Providence school teacher.

lborg@projo.com / (401) 277-7823